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Avant-Garde Transformation of Artistic Labor: The Productivist View of Boris Arvatov

Abstract: The basic thesis of the article is that in historical materialist theory a distinction can be made between the terms *work* and *labor*. *Work* refers to a specific activity – sewing, weaving, painting, sculpting. *Labor* refers to the social relationship, primarily between different social groups, i.e., classes – wage labor, serfdom, slavery, petty craftsmanship. Art history has approached the avant-garde mainly from the aspect of artistic *work* – for example, how the avant-garde transformed work in the domain of painting into work in the domain of three-dimensional construction. This article tries to think of the avant-garde as a phenomenon that has transformed art in terms of artistic *labor*. The basis is the transition from constructivism to productivism in Soviet art in the 1920s, and especially Boris Arvatov’s theoretical postulates.

Keywords: historical materialism; labor theory of value; political economy; avant-garde art; Soviet avant-garde; constructivism; productivism.

“Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is not part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it.” These lines were written by Karl Marx in the famous chapter on commodity fetishism (“The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof”) in *Capital*, Volume I.¹ In that chapter, Marx points out that to us, as subjects of ideology, the real nature of commodity and monetary relations, especially in a highly developed society such as the capitalist one, remains for the most part invisible. The problem is that we typically perceive commodities in terms of their use value: the purpose of a chair is to enable you to sit down, that of a coat is to keep you warm, that is, the usefulness of a given object turns that object into a use value. Assessing the usefulness of an object, we do not stop to consider whether our embrace of a given use value cost a human being a

¹ Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2011), 95.

significant or a modest amount of labor. Use value materializes only through usage or consumption. In our everyday life, the processes of exploiting people that enable the production of a certain thing or commodity remain unknowable to us – to discern them, to render them visible, we need theory (historical materialism and its critique of classical political economy) with its abstract concepts, such as, most prominently *exchange value*. *Use value* refers to the sphere of consumption, the domain of meeting the needs of humans, the consumption of commodities, and the material side of wealth, whatever its social form. This social form of wealth has yet to be explored by analyzing production – therefore, *exchange value* refers to production and not to circulation, the exploitation of labor that yields commodities and not their consumption. If the *use value* of a chair equals its ability to fulfill our need to have something to sit down on, its *exchange value* is determined by the amount of labor that went into its production. In other words, the production of a coat entailed human labor in the form of sewing and tailoring. However, that does not require us, who might use that coat, only to appreciate the concrete human activities that went into it, such as tailoring or sewing. A coat contains not only concrete labor, but also *abstract labor*: to determine the turnover value of a coat, one must assess the technological development of the means of production in the society where the coat was produced, that is, the *average socially necessary labor time* required to produce the coat; the shorter that time is, the less valuable the coat is and thereby the lower its price is on the market. Marx thus pinpoints the key categories of the historical-materialist method: instead of use value, historical materialism deals with *value*; instead of concrete labor, historical materialism analyzes *abstract labor*; finally, instead of the consumption sphere, historical materialism deals with that of *production*. As long as we remain in the sphere of use value, concrete labor, and consumption, we remain in the sphere of *commodity fetishism*, that is, the social relations that determine the causalities of bourgeois society remain hidden and invisible to us.

As a scholarly discipline, the history of art was and still is a bourgeois discipline precisely because it persistently fails to break through this fetishist treatment of its own object of study. Art history deals with art as a collection of objects, the consumption of those objects, and analyzing the concrete labor expended on making them, instead of addressing art as a system of socially specific *production*. When historians of art analyze artworks, they usually treat them as objects with their own inherent properties. As Marx wrote in the chapter on commodity fetishism mentioned above, “a pearl or a diamond is valuable as a pearl or a diamond. So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange value either in a pearl or a diamond”.² By analogy, for art historians a work of art is valuable as a work of art and therefore, like Marx’s chemists, no art historian so far has ever discovered exchange value in a work of art. Art historians find that the use value of objects (they would call it “aesthetic value”) is independent from their actual qualities and that value belongs to them as objects. What validates their view is that the use value of an object for a human being is indeed realized

² Ibid., 53.

without exchange, therefore in a direct relation between the human being and the object,³ whereas its value is realized only by social exchange, that is, by means of a *social process*. By observing objects as such, as aesthetic values per se, art historians observe only artistic objects, but not social relations as well. Art historians fail to break out of this vicious cycle of aesthetic fetishism, even when they seek to revise their own discipline: whereas classical art history focused its attention on the formal (the formal method) or intrinsic (content-wise) properties of an object of art (the iconographic and iconological method), the so-called social history of art addresses the reception (consumption) and circulation of these objects. The contribution of social historians of art is their discovery of an entire array of topics and problems previously neglected by their formalist- or iconography-oriented colleagues: for instance, the problem of patronage in pre-modern art and the rise of the art market in modern art. These historians of art have also analyzed the prices of artworks, changes in aesthetic tastes, as well as the formation of an artistic audience (enabled by the rise of the bourgeois public sphere), the emergence and development of national museums (which transformed the reception of art from the aristocracy's enjoyment of luxuries into the bourgeoisie's enjoyment of universal culture), and the like.⁴ However, all of these topics and problems still belong in the sphere of the consumption and not *production* of art. This even applies to the category of labor: when they discuss labor in art, art historians typically mean *concrete labor*, i.e., *work* and not *labor* as a social relation in terms of Marx's critique of political economy. Namely, it is one thing to write about whether an artist worked with marble or bronze like in the renaissance, or at the easel, like in modernism, or whether she wrote theoretical discussions like in conceptual art, and quite another to analyze whether an artist is in a relation of contractual wage labor with a gallery owner or collector, whether she produces surplus value (i.e. whether her work is productive or non-productive), and whether she supports herself by collecting rent or interest. The object, consumption, and concrete labor (work) form the basis of the art-historical method.

Perhaps that is precisely why the set of problems posed in the Productivist phase of Soviet constructivism forms an especially challenging spot in art-historical analysis. Namely, right after the October Revolution, the question of the role and place of art in the new socialist society became one of the central issues in contemporary debates. Even before the revolution, leftist-oriented artists had been looking for new forms of artistic expression. Nevertheless, whereas the pre-revolutionary avant-garde had mostly sought to reshape the *object* of art, the post-revolutionary constellation made it possible to broach the issue of transforming the *production* of art. The debates waged in the early 1920s at the Institute of Artistic Culture (InHuK, Институт Художественной Культуры) are especially indicative in that regard. The first director of the Institute was Wassily Kandinsky and immediately upon its establishment

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dave Beech, *Art and Labour: On the Hostility to Handicraft, Aesthetic Labour and the Politics of Work in Art* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 48–49.

there was a rift regarding the program of the Institute. Kandinsky sought to implement a policy based on his earlier modernist reflections on art: he devised a program of scholarly research in the main elements, i.e. expressive devices of individual arts (painting, music, poetry, etc.), intended to accomplish a synthesis of various disciplines of art. Kandinsky conducted these explorations by following prevalingly psychological principles, with emphatically subjective, intuitive, and metaphysical connotations, with the main question being how artistic devices act on the human soul, i.e. what kind of psychological and emotional feelings they trigger in the recipient.⁵ This modernist, intuitive, and formalist approach was opposed by a group of artists who soon formed the core of the so-called Working Group for Objective Analysis. This group came to dominate the Institute, with its members replacing Kandinsky's subjectivism and metaphysics with a rational approach to studying the phenomena of construction in space. In 1921, this approach spawned the First Working Group of Constructivists (Konstantin Medunetsky, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, Karlis Johansons, Aleksei Gan, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova), who began reflecting on art in relation to social upheaval and class revolution. In the early 1920s, the Institute's work was thus shaped by the ideas of so-called laboratory Constructivism and then also those of productive art. While laboratory Constructivism was still experimenting with the problem of the *object* of art, the Productivist line focused on the idea of a total transformation of the *production* of art, by advocating the entry of artists into industry. This became the dominant orientation of the Institute especially from May 1921 on, when Alexander Rodchenko was replaced at the helm by Osip Brik, in other words, when control over the Institute was transferred from artist-constructivists to theorists of productive art, affiliated with the journal *LEF*. At the initiative of Osip Brik, the Institute voted to adopt a manifesto of Productivism, marking that day in its annals as "one of 'great historical significance'. Some 25 painters had decided to abandon the creation of 'pure forms' and turn to construction in 'production'."⁶

It seems that for art-historical analysis there was something essentially counterintuitive in that switch from Constructivism to Productivism, that is, regarding the entry of artists into the world of industry (which was especially advocated by theorists at InHuK and *LEF* such as Boris Arvatov, Aleksei Gan, Osip Brik, Boris Kushner (Kušner), Nikolai Tarabukin, and Nikolai Chuzhak). Most studies of Constructivism assert that the Constructivists transformed artwork, but the way they sought to transform artistic production (thereby including labor) is usually left aside. The transformation of artistic work is thereby marked as the transformation from the two-dimensional painting of modernism to the three-dimensional constructions of the avant-garde, that is, from a non-utilitarian work to a utilitarian object, but not, for instance, as a transformation of art from a type of petty handicraft production into art

⁵ Slobodan Mijušković, *Od samodovoljnosti do smrti slikarstva. Umetničke teorije (i prakse) ruske avangarde* (Beograd: Geopoetika, 1998), 256.

⁶ Sonja Briski-Uzelac, "Inhuk", u *Pojmovnik ruske avangarde*, knj. 3, uredili Aleksandar Flaker i Dubravka Ugrešić, (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske i Zavod za znanost o književnosti Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu, 1985), 91–106.

as a type of socialized industrial production. An example of that is a frequently cited study by Christina Kiaer.⁷ Her chief claim is that the Constructivists/Productivists took an active part in the socialist revolution, not by replacing the world of capitalist commodities with one of socialist commodities, but by offering something much bigger, in psychological terms: “the material object as an active, almost animate participant in social life”.⁸ In her analysis, Kiaer apparently makes the following distinction: a capitalist commodity is something monotonous, alienating, an object that is standardized, offering a false freedom of choice, predicated on a mechanical repetition of stereotypes, the deadening of individuality, and the like. By contrast, a communist object is liberating, stimulating creativity, cultivating a non-alienating type of sociality, and harboring unrestrained affectivity. The communist/Constructivist revolution is the transformation of passive capitalist commodities into active socialist things:

This book investigates this concept of the ‘socialist object’ as Russian Constructivism’s original contribution not only to the history of the political avant-garde art movements of the twentieth century, but also to the theory of a noncapitalist form of modernity. The socialist object addresses a fundamental problem in Marxist thought: what happens to the individual fantasies and desires organized under capitalism by the commodity fetish and the market after the revolution? Capitalism, in its honing of the commodity form that endlessly organizes and gives form to these desires, has a profound weapon that socialism cannot simply cede to it. The Constructivist counterproposal to this weapon is the object-as-comrade.⁹

However, as we already saw above, the main method of the critique of political economy is to eliminate all discussion of the *use value* of commodities and instead focus on their *value*. In Marxist thought, there is no such thing as a “socialist object” (which is supposedly affective, psychologically provocative, as opposed to the capitalist commodity, which is allegedly trivial, standardized, dull, and the like). There is only the socialist mode of producing use values: capitalism produces these use values *as commodities*, while the essence of replacing capitalism with communism is the production of utilitarian objects no longer as commodities but as ordinary use values. Namely, producing commodities in the capitalist way means that there is a certain fundamental antagonism in the process of production that is characteristic of capitalist societies: that between capital and labor. The producers (workers) do not own the means of production and therefore sell their labor on the labor market to those who possess capital. In the process of production, they create surplus value in excess of the

⁷ Christina Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2005).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

value of their labor (i.e., wages), which is appropriated by the capitalist in the form of (industrial, commercial, etc.) profit. A commodity is a use value with added surplus labor, materialized, objectified, and alienated. The essence of communism is that this surplus should go to the producers themselves, which would prevent the alienation of surplus labor. Use values would no longer be produced as commodities but as regular use values. Therefore, undoing the alienation of surplus labor would not entail replacing the dull and standardized commodities of capitalism with some affective and creative objects in communism, but supplanting production by alienating surplus labor with production in direct control of this surplus. Therefore, switching from capitalism to communism is about developing a different type of organization of *production* and not making a different kind of *objects*. Or, to revert to the example used above: a coat with exactly the same (physical or aesthetic) properties may be produced both as a commodity in a capitalist society and as a utilitarian item in a communist society – what qualifies a commodity as such are not some inherent properties it might have but a web of social relations that are over-determined by a certain form of production.

A question that here emerges by itself, one that theorists of Productivism were entirely aware of, is this: if the transition from capitalism to communism implies a transformation of a certain form of production, by abolishing private ownership of the means of production, what happens to artistic production? Apparently, the Productivists maintained that the socialization of production would necessarily entail that of artistic production as well – which is precisely why Boris Arvatov titled his central book *Art and Production*¹⁰ and shaped its structure as an economic history of artistic production and labor in the world of art instead of a standard history of artistic objects. Modern historians of art appear to avoid this fact: in her chapters on Arvatov, Christina Kiaer, for instance, keeps highlighting his remarks about the Constructivist object, while simply skipping over his ideas about production. Namely, in his book, Arvatov writes: “Only when we analyse the activity of artists socially and economically – and not *psychologically*, philosophically or formally – will its true nature, its real, objectively demonstrable properties in a given historical period be clear to us” (italics N.D.).¹¹ By contrast, Kiaer, precisely in her chapter dealing with Arvatov, stresses his purported “emphasis on the *psychological* power of objects” and writes: “Approaching the affective or *psychological* aspects of the socialist object also invites, at various moments in this study, the use of psychoanalytic models of interpretation – not applied to the artists themselves, but rather used as a means to understand their artworks and texts” (italics N.D.).¹² Evidently, it is high time to return the analysis of Constructivism/Productivism to the domain that Arvatov himself envisaged – to extract it from the domain of art history and its aesthetic fetishism and return it to the domain of the Marxist critique of political economy. In other words, what we need is an economic and not aesthetic interpretation of the Productivist turn.

¹⁰ Boris Arvatov, *Art and Production* (London: Brill, 2017).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹² Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions*, 36.

In his study mentioned above, Boris Arvatov advances the claim that in the domain of artistic production, the transition from bourgeois to socialist society may be construed as a transition from *small-scale craft* to *industrial* production. In this interpretation of art based on economic categories, as well as in linking art with industry, even today, art historians often see an instrumentalization and ideologization of artistic work. Hidden behind this is apparently the old prejudice of art history regarding the problem of economic production: the notion of linking art with production rests on non-artistic considerations, that is, it appears as a commitment to sociological and ideological rather than artistic imperatives. As Slobodan Mijušković asserts, the Productivists define art not within its internal position, but in relation to extra-artistic, social, and lived circumstances: “The issue was no longer what art should do regarding the condition of the autonomous domain of its own immanent, primarily formal-linguistic problems, but how to adapt to the circumstances surrounding it, how to adapt its form, language, and speech to the demands of the new socio-political environment”.¹³ The problem with this view is that by concentrating only on artistic objects and positing some immanent properties of art, the history of art fails to see that art, even in the modernist sense of its radical autonomy, *already* is a form of production, i.e. a certain kind of economic activity. What Arvatov does is not assigning non-artistic criteria to art but translating the very notion of art as it pertains to bourgeois societies to the language of Marxist political economy, thereby defining it first as a type of small-scale craft production and then proposing to change that mode of production. Therefore, we may recognize Arvatov as an authentic contributor to a theory that Marx and Engels did not get to write – a critique of the political economy of art.

Namely, Arvatov constructs his analysis based on a deep familiarity with the historical materialist method. One of the main starting points of this method is the distinction between the capitalist and non-capitalist forms of production. The peculiarity of capitalism is that it is the only mode of production in history where surplus labor is appropriated by exploiting wage labor as the dominant form of labor: the exchange of free labor for money was one of the historical prerequisites for the emergence of capitalism. It entailed the separation of labor from the conditions of its own realization – from the means and materials of work. By contrast, in art, there is no separation between the producer and the means of production – for a writer, musician, or painter, their means of production are not emancipated as a power in its own right, independent from them. On the contrary, the producer is the owner, the proprietor of his means of production.¹⁴ Those means of production, therefore, do not constitute capital, just as the artist does not relate to them as a wage laborer. The artist as a producer thereby remains on an almost pre-capitalist level of production, that is, in the domain of small-scale craft production. This is the main starting

¹³ Mijušković, *Od samodovoljnosti do smrti slikarstva*, 251.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value, Volume 1* (A Radical Imprint of Pattern Books, 2020), 479.

point of Arvatov's analysis: precisely because it does not directly fall under the capitalist mode of production, artistic production in bourgeois society seems out of step with industrial production and consequently with life itself. In capitalism, neither the wage laborers nor the owners of the means of production can pursue art: the former are busy with directly participating in production, while the latter are occupied with competing with one another. Art therefore falls to specialists who do not participate in the industrial process of production but, instead, act through a profoundly atavistic mode of work – craft. Still, this kind of craftwork is strictly different from that of the medieval artist/artisan/craftsman: back then, artists were at the same time producers of utilitarian objects, that is, they shared with other producers the same relation with their means of production. In the capitalist world, however, artists no longer share the same form of the means of production with other producers, that is, they no longer fit into the dominant model of producing. In bourgeois society artists thus lose their connection with the collective and instead search for the meaning of their work in self-sufficiency. This is the economic basis of the bourgeois autonomy of art and bourgeois aesthetic fetishism – up until the Middle Ages, art was a part of life; with the rise of the bourgeoisie, the dismantling of feudalism and the world of craft guilds, art was apparently out of step with life. Arvatov thus articulates the history of art through that of various forms of production and alternation of different social formations: feudalism – the age of trading capital – the industrial revolution – socialism.

Overall, feudalism was an economy predicated on subsistence production: feudal manors produced whatever was needed to meet the needs of the lord and serfs alike, and only a negligible surplus went to the market. These were limited and fragmented local markets concentrated on the towns, which were still few and far between. The towns were dominated by small-scale craft production, still controlled by guilds, i.e., trade associations. The interaction between the feudal manors and the towns was local in character and for the most part concerned the needs of the feudal lords in terms of status, that is, conspicuous consumption. That is why market exchange in the Middle Ages was mostly local in character, with a rather limited need for money; feudal taxation could easily take place without the mediation of money or the market, through labor rent and rent in kind. Therefore, in the Middle Ages one could not speak of the bourgeoisie as a separate class – at the time, the word *bourgeois* or *burger* was but an administrative label for town dwellers. The activities of the craft guilds were constrained by a strict system of rules handed down from one generation to the next: under such a system, originality and individual creativity were not allowed. Therefore, art was no different from craft – it was organized by the same guild principles. Precisely for that reason, like in every craft, where the master, who owns his own means of production, for the most part controls the process of production, in art, too, there was no strict division of labor: an artist could create items for satisfying everyday needs (use values), without having to modify the technical underpinning of his work (by innovating or specializing, for instance). Like other craftsmen, artists perhaps differed from the rest of the masses only in terms of their economic

conservatism (the guilds' protectionism, in order to control and prevent competition) and maybe by working for wealthy patrons (above all the church, municipal authorities, i.e. magistrates, other guilds, and feudal nobility, who indulged in spending, as was mentioned above, for the sake of conspicuous consumption).¹⁵ Finally, an artist was distinguished from the members of other guilds only by possibly being more skilled but not by using different means of production.

A radical change occurred only with the rise of trading capital: the geographical discoveries of the 16th and 17th centuries favored the development of mercantilism and at the same time prepared the ground for the transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production. It was the sudden expansion of the global market, the proliferation of commodities in circulation, and competition between European nations in colonial conquests. Under these conditions, merchants began to exert an influence on the transformation of production and the dismantling of the craft guilds' monopolies, in two ways: they accumulated capital and gradually took over production, or, alternatively, individual craftsmen gained so much economic strength, that is, accumulated so much capital that they began to take over trading. This takeover of production by trading capital proceeded at the expense of small-scale urban craftsmen.¹⁶ The ever-expanding market and capital accumulation drove the demand for a progressively cheaper workforce, pursued by these proto-capitalists beyond the city walls and the status privileges of the guilds. At first, this took place in the form of working from home: workers who were not members of a guild worked from home, received their remuneration per piece, and supplied the merchant with finished products. The merchant, increasingly turning into a proto-industrial capitalist, thus began to exert total control over producers like these homebound workers, who were no longer responsible to guild associations and their status monopolies. Artists, still producer-owners of their own means of production, were slowly but surely left out of these processes: with the rise of trading capital, artists were increasingly forced to switch from producing utilitarian objects to producing only luxury items. A consequence of this was the specialization of artistic labor: as long as they were craftsmen affiliated with a guild, artists were satisfied to manufacture utilitarian items with skill and in high quality; now, however, artists had to reduce their skills to a mere handful of select techniques and a few "noble" materials.¹⁷ Thus they ceased to participate in real production – giving rise to a new aesthetic accompanied by the refined tastes of the wealthy strata of society (the ideology of the beautiful in art, which would soon give rise to the so-called system of fine arts), while artists ceased to perceive themselves as craftsmen. Instead, they began to form special elite organizations, *academies*, excluding from them non-artists and their trades. Artistic labor thus ceased to fulfill society's everyday needs and began to serve only as a luxury and affirmation of class

¹⁵ Arvatov, *Art and Production*, 18–19.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Three* (London: Penguin, 1991), 440–45; Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, 1950), 123.

¹⁷ Arvatov, *Art and Production*, 24.

power, that is, as Arvatov asserts using the example of Michelangelo: art began to satisfy the demands of the eye and not those of everyday life.

These processes deepened even more with mercantilism's further transformation into manufacturing proto-capitalism. Due to the need to cut the cost of production and boost productivity, working from home, mentioned above, which had been organized by big merchants, was gradually replaced by working under one roof – giving rise to manufactures with an increasingly complex division of labor whereby a single worker controlled only a small segment of the production process. Competition between individual manufactures provoked the first technical innovations. Market competition appeared, while manufacturing proto-capitalists became increasingly preoccupied with the quantitative side of production (boosting productivity by way of still relatively modest technical inventions). This definitely pushed out the old craftsmen, guilds and their system of status and rules, part and parcel of their economic protectionism – instead of being crafted, utilitarian products were increasingly produced as commodities, therefore in the capitalist fashion (through abstract labor). That meant the demise of the medieval city and the emergence of impersonal economic forces. Artists could no longer participate in these processes – at the most, like in France in the absolutist age, they could organize manufacturing production and thus occupy a position outside the production process. Apart from that, the only remaining clients who still commissioned works of art were the court and the state – art began serving as an adornment of court pageantry (the Baroque in the age of absolute monarchies) or merely to decorate objects (the aristocracy pursuing their gallant lifestyle by consuming luxuries, and the bourgeoisie, who were either entirely left out of these processes or tastelessly aping the aristocracy).

The Industrial Revolution as well as the development of capitalist relations in full brought the separation of art from everyday life to its aestheticist summit. A prerequisite for the emergence of industrial capitalism was a massive dispossession of the population, regarding primarily the ownership of land and their own means of production, which laid the groundwork for a mass proletarianization of the population, necessary for the development of industry. Whereas in pre-capitalist societies, producers themselves produced their own means of subsistence with the option of selling whatever surpluses they made on external markets (the temporal and spatial separation of production and consumption), in capitalism, the producers (wage laborers) are no longer able to produce those goods by themselves and have to buy them instead on the capitalist market. Precisely for that reason, the proletariat is at once the main producer and the main consumer of commodities (for instance, food, clothing, everyday use items, and the like), which generates the pressure to produce as cheaply as possible and create an integrated national and then global market. To produce more cheaply is possible only through technological innovations that reduce the average socially necessary labor time for producing commodities: these innovations in production enable the volume of production to expand, the emergence of a mass market, and finally – the beginning of an industrial revolution. With this revolution,

for the first time in history, there emerged an integrated (global) market on which producers competed with one another in order to drive the prices of their products down. Therefore, industrial capitalism is predicated on an endless accumulation of *relative surplus value*, that is, on producing by means of *abstract labor*, i.e. on the production of use values *as commodities*. The consequence is a universal collectivization of the forces of production – everyday life is buried in endless capitalist commodities, shaped by standardization, economy, uniformity, and the universalization of objects. In the world of capitalist commodity production, there is no longer room for individual arbitrariness or personal taste – what occurs is a unification of forms, creating items bereft of stylization and aestheticisation, by using industrial materials.

During all this time, while real production progressed by means of machine technology, artists were still using historically backward, atavistic techniques of production and thereby dropped out entirely of the process of production. The reaction of artists, precisely because their mode of production was not technically evolving, was one of disdain for machines and industries: machines were perceived as something that ruined ‘free’ creativity.¹⁸ Art was no longer determined by either technical or social aims, but only by the artist’s taste. This is the basis of modernist aestheticism – the artist seeks to escape the world of commodity production, declares that his trade is non-economic, and believes that it rests on its own inherent principles and rules. The material phenomenality of this belief and its atavistic way of working is the artwork as a non-utilitarian exhibition artifact. This artifact is entirely withdrawn from everyday life and its only purpose and function is to offer emotional experiences – the aim of painting in bourgeois society is to compensate emotionally for the imperfections of life. With this also comes extreme artistic individualism: an easel painting reveals its author’s personality through the principle of expressivity. In the 19th century, artists had still not abandoned the imitation of nature, but with the rise of modernism, they increasingly espoused a subjective view of nature: the rapid growth of industrial cities left artists exposed, steeped in an archaic and atavistic mode of production, driving them to seek refuge in nature and thus construct an image of themselves as poorly adapted individuals. In painting, the Impressionists cultivated an extreme type of emotional subjectivism. Expressionism went another step, assessing every element of a painting inasmuch as it expressed an individual’s psychological state – an easel painting became an aim in its own right, while expressionism, as a paradigm of modern art, became an art of psychological solipsism.

Leftist-oriented artists often sought to get out of this vicious circle of solipsistic expressionism, by advocating a sort of proletarian painting: a typical example would be the realism of Courbet. Artists like these, however, inevitably end up in a contradiction – using a typically bourgeois form such as painting in an attempt to transcend bourgeois society. Such an endeavor invariably ends up in failure: since painting is a bourgeois form, it is impossible to construct a proletarian easel painting, precisely because the economic forces that conditioned the emergence of easel painting remain

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

intact. Proletarian art is not a matter of content; rather, it entails changing the entire way art is produced. The revolution in art cannot take place by revolutionizing the artistic *object*, but by transforming artistic *production*. Art cannot do that by itself, but only by coming together with those sociopolitical forces that likewise seek revolutionary change in society. This is the essence of the transition from non-utilitarian Constructivism to Productivism. The significance of Constructivism is precisely that its conceptual creators were no longer artists but members of the technical intelligentsia, i.e. authors trained at industrial hubs and nurtured on the positivism of the natural and technical sciences.¹⁹ They were the first to use non-artistic materials such as glass, stone, metal, and wire, and it was their achievement that art finally dispensed with artistic illusionism: in lieu of illusionist two-dimensional representation, the Constructivists embraced the ‘realism’ (in terms of the physical reality of the material) of three-dimensional construction. Nevertheless, following this initial breakthrough of Constructivism, it was necessary, in the Productivists’ view, to venture another step and transcend even those three-dimensional non-utilitarian forms stemming from the self-critique of the tradition of easel painting – a construction may no longer be a two-dimensional aestheticist painting, but it still is a non-utilitarian artistic object in space. By connecting artists with the legacy of the October Revolution and joining in the process of industrializing the country, the economic basis of artistic production would likewise change. Only when this revolutionary change occurs in artistic production will a principle that was laid out as early as the manifesto of the Constructivists’ Working Group finally materialize: expressing the communist idea in material structures.²⁰

Theorizing the transition from capitalism to socialism was the basis of all Bolshevik debates led after the October Revolution, including those pertaining to art. These debates revolved around the issue of replacing an economy predicated on private ownership of the means of production and, consequently, on reproducing profit and competition, which precisely for that reason followed an unpredictable and anarchic path, marred by constantly recurring crises, with a planned economy that would not be subordinated to turning a profit but would serve to satisfy everyday human needs. This transition was perhaps most precisely formulated by the Soviet economist Isaak Illich Rubin. In his view, in capitalism and the capitalist commodity economy there is no one consciously supporting or regulating the distribution of social labor, which would correspond to the given state of the productive forces, among different branches of industry. Precisely on that account, capitalist economies keep lurching from crisis to crisis, perennially falling out of economic equilibrium. By contrast, building a socialist society means to create an economy where all labor activities would be planned and coordinated accordingly, starting from assessing the needs of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰ Slobodan Mijušković, ed., *Dokumenti za razumevanje ruske avangarde* (Beograd: Geopoetika, 2003), 220.

the material-technical process of production in advance. In other words, in a society with a regulated economy such as the socialist society, the relations of production between individual members of society are established consciously, with the aim of securing a regular course of production. According to Rubin, the “role of each member of society in the production process, namely his relationship to other members, is consciously defined”.²¹ Further,

The unity which exists at the starting point makes possible a correspondence between the material-technical process of production and the production relations which shape it. Later on, each of these sides develops on the basis of a previously determined plan. Each side has its internal logic, but due to the unity at the start, no contradiction develops between them.²²

The initial (but not the only) step toward establishing this type of rational control over all economic activities is the eradication of private ownership, that is, the socialization of the means of production – the entire social wealth, the land with its natural resources, all the factories and workshops must be seized from their private owners – the exploiters – and transferred to the common property of the people. Historically, in the 20th century, socialisms developed different forms of this “common property”; nonetheless, in Bolshevik discussions following the October Revolution there was universal consensus, agreement between all Bolshevik factions, “left” and “right” alike, that the socialization of the means of production must necessarily begin by nationalizing and then translating private into state property. In the Soviet Union, socialization was thereby equated with nationalization or statization (only later would Yugoslav socialism develop the concept of social ownership). This conception of socialization does not exist in Marx’s original theory – in those few places where he does discuss the organization of the future socialist society, Marx typically mentions free associations of direct producers. In time, these free associations would lead to the withering away of the state. By contrast, the Bolsheviks set out precisely from the state as the main element of class liberation – the reasons for that were historical, grounded in their analysis of the immediate causes of the October Revolution. Namely, the Revolution was a response to World War I and, in particular, the great powers’ imperialism, itself a consequence of capitalism’s progressing from its free competition stage (which existed in Marx’s time) to that of monopoly capitalism. In that sense, an enormous strengthening of the state, accompanied by a sort of statization of the means of production, was already a reality in the capitalist world. These processes were most precisely expressed by Vladimir Ilych Lenin²³ and Nikolai Bukharin.²⁴

²¹ Rubin, Isaak I, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2008), 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

²³ V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

²⁴ Nikolai Bukharin, *The Politics and Economics of the Transition Period* (London: Routledge, 2007).

In their view, capitalism was originally a disorganized entity that emerged through a continuous circulation of commodities in exchange. Although seemingly a system devoid of a purposeful organization of labor, the rise of finance capital abolished the anarchy in production within the major capitalist countries. Monopolistic alliances of employers, combined enterprises, and the penetration of banking capital into industry “has created a new model of production relations, which transformed the unorganized commodity capitalist system into a finance capitalist *organization*”.²⁵ Monopoly capitalism had thereby established a new type of links between capitalist economic units (enterprises): planning, regulation, standardization, partial nationalization of infrastructure, transportation, and the like, replacing unregulated free competition. State-monopoly trusts, characteristic of the age of monopoly capitalism and imperialism, dominated the system of global economy at the time – competition and anarchy thereby did not disappear but progressed from the national to a higher, global level, while the world economy became an anarchic struggle between opposing state-capitalist trusts, which finally led to World War I (capitalist centralization by imperialist annexations). Precisely for those reasons, for the Bolsheviks, the state, as well as the way the revolution changed the basis of state power, formed the most important issues of the age. Winning state power and then transforming private to state property were the initial steps toward transforming an economy based on the anarchic pursuit of profit to a planned economy based on meeting the needs of the people. Therefore, the Bolsheviks did not consider that an automatic and direct switch from capitalism to communism was possible, but that, instead, there had to be a transitional period, during which certain elements of the old system would subsist in the new circumstances. In other words, the revolution would not dismantle all the socio-technical relations of the old system, but only those of the hierarchical type. Therefore, elements of the new society should be sought within the production relations of the old – the new society cannot emerge *deus ex machina*; its elements grow within the old society.²⁶ Thus the question that authors such as Bukharin and Lenin pose is the following: what kind of production relations may be at all built into the foundations of the new structure of production? They locate the answer in Volume III of Marx’s *Capital*, the section where Marx identifies a chance for switching to socialism in the emergence of trusts and state monopolies. According to Bukharin, “Marx puts forward two basic features: the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour, which flourished along with the capitalist mode of production and within it. It is these two features which form the basis of the new mode of production, which develops in the midst of the old.”²⁷

The question that faced the theorists of Productivism following the October Revolution was similar to the one posed by the Bolsheviks concerning the socialist economy in its “transition” stage: how should the transformation of artistic production

²⁵ Ibid., 60.

²⁶ Ibid., 94.

²⁷ Ibid.

proceed, that is, how should the transition from capitalism to socialism manifest in the arts? The Productivists' answer was unequivocal – by way of the aforementioned centralization of the means of production and socialization of artistic labor. The Productivists thereby sought to overcome one of the fundamental contradictions of Marxist theory of art that was present as early as Marx's own time and his fragmentary remarks on art, i.e., the difference between *labor* and *creation*. This critique of Marx and Marxist theory was advanced by Boris Arvatov, asserting that up until the October Revolution, the theory had failed to view art in economic terms, i.e., by applying the labor theory of value.

Concerning the leftist tradition of art, Arvatov's remark was certainly correct. In its earliest stages, the labor movement did not even have its own artists, and whatever attempts at establishing a proletarian artistic production were made, mostly ended up in petty-bourgeois utopianism. A typical example is William Morris – he tried to overcome the distinction between creation and labor, but, misidentifying machines (and not a specific form of social relations) as the cause of capitalist exploitation and looking for models in the medieval guilds, he finally ended up producing luxury items. Concerning Marx, Arvatov's critique is only partly correct – the fact is that Marx's remarks on art were left ambiguous and incomplete. In his early writings, one may identify typically Romanticist views of art as creation: the Romanticist category of an all-encompassing aesthetic sphere as the opposite of human alienation within the capitalist system of production may still be found on the margins of his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Nevertheless, in his later works, especially in *Theories of Surplus Value*²⁸, Marx provided a wealth of examples for an economic interpretation of art as a form of labor: in those writings he used art to analyze the difference between productive and non-productive labor, that is, the distinction between the type of labor that yields surplus value (by entering into a wage relation) and that which only satisfies the client's individual needs (in those cases where there is no wage relation and therefore no surplus value either). These places form the basis for a Marxist critique of the political economy of art. This manuscript writing by Marx could have been known to Productivist theorists (the manuscript was edited from Marx's notes by Karl Kautsky and published in 1910). Still, it is a fact that Marx here offers examples only from bourgeois, capitalist society, without ever hinting at what artistic production might look like in a post-revolutionary, socialist society.

Thus Boris Arvatov, following the model of the Bolshevik theory of the transition from capitalism to socialism, summarized above, in lieu of a theory of free artistic creativity states his theses about the centralization of artistic production and socialization of artistic labor. The central point in this claim is Arvatov's reflection on the means of production in arts: as we already saw above, in bourgeois-capitalist societies, artists own their means of production, which places them in a contradiction with industrial production – they make their products as craftsmen while other commodities are mass produced. Artists are thereby separated from everyday life, using atavistic

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value, Volume 1* (A Radical Imprint of Pattern Books, 2020).

means of production to fashion the economic basis of the notion of art's autonomy. However, that does not mean that artists are outside of capitalism and not subject to capitalist relations. A proof of that is the existence of art markets. In pre-capitalist formations, for instance, in the Middle Ages, art markets did not exist; instead, artists were commissioned to produce their works, they knew their buyers, and adhered to their special demands and needs. With the development of the capitalist market and capitalist commodity and monetary exchange, that is, with the disintegration of the system of guilds and urban crafts, followed by the traditional system of academies, the traditional relations of patronage likewise fell apart, replaced by an anonymous, impersonal, and blind art market. To satisfy the needs of this market, artists began creating works that transformed classic handmade utilitarian objects into rarities, valuables, cultural goods, that is, a specific form of un-reproducible and non-utilitarian objects. Artists were forced to don an aura of originality, individuality, pure style, emotional and psychological expressivity, in order to produce cultural objects that would be unique and inimitable, and thereby ready to be sold at monopoly prices. The product of artistic labor is not a typical capitalist commodity on the level of production but is a commodity on the level of exchange – precisely because it is produced by artisan techniques, an artwork is commodified on the level of exchanging luxury goods. In other words, artworks in bourgeois society are treated as specialized products intended for decorative purposes, entertainment, and consumption in leisure time rather than in the domain of “social improvement”. With the transition from capitalism to socialism, this type of market would disappear, and artistic labor would necessarily undergo a process of socialization/statization and merge with the socialist production sector, that is, with state-owned industry. In Arvatov's words,

The proletariat will inevitably arrive at the socialization of artistic labour, the eradication of private ownership of not only products (this is only an immediate result), but also of the instruments and means of artistic production. The tendencies of proletarian artistic production, already evident in our day, will be a natural form of artistic production – working directly for the collective consumer and subordinated, in whole or in part, to the entire system of social production.

This means, first of all, that proletarian artistic collectives must enter into and collaborate with the collectives and unions of various branches of production, the materials of which will be shaped by the corresponding forms of art. So, for instance, agitation-theatre joins the state agitation apparatus as an organ of education; the theatre of mass and other everyday life activities is linked to the institutes of physical culture, communal organizations, etc.; poets join journal and newspaper unions and through them connect with linguistic societies; industrial artists work by assignment in the organizational system of industrial centres, and so on.

Within such a structure of artistic labour, individual artists become the collaborators of engineers, scientists, and administrators, organizing a common product, while being guided not by personal impulses, but the objective needs of social production, and carrying out the assignments of the class through its organizational centres.²⁹

This socialization of artistic labor would enable all other changes in the domain of artistic production, pertaining to artistic techniques, the ideologies of artists, and, finally, the relationship between art and everyday life. In terms of technique, the socialization of artistic labor and eradication of private ownership of the means of artistic production (switching from small-scale craft to state industrial production) would break the fetishism of artistic materials. Whereas in bourgeois society, amid the world's greatest technological achievements, the artist still works in the domain of small-scale craft production (giving rise to isolation and the illusion of the self-sufficiency of art), socialist society would see the collapse of the barrier between artistic technique and social technique. Proletarian culture is not predicated on a separation between art and industrial production, but on a specific kind of monism that entails works in all sorts of techniques in order to satisfy human needs. This breaks the fetishism of means, forms, and aims (96); in other words, while bourgeois art entails specializing in individual materials, proletarian art rests on using all kinds of materials. Artisanal means of work are replaced by industrial means, while art undergoes a process of “electrification” in order to be able to meet the objective aims of socialist construction. This achieves the socio-technical monism of artistic production.

In the domain of ideology, bourgeois art foregrounds an isolated and lonesome artist figure; this artist cultivates a subjective taste and “inspiration” and knows nothing of the social and technical causalities of his own work. This kind of spontaneous and intuitive art is impossible in a planned socialist society: socialism is a consciously planned and organized society, in which all politico-economic activities are subordinated to quantifiable scientific formulations (Marxism, scientific organization of labor, and the like). Artistic practice would necessarily rest on similar grounds – by normalizing and rationalizing both the goals and methods of artistic construction.³⁰ The traditional system of art education would disappear and along with it the pseudo-sciences of aesthetics would likewise vanish, since they do not study art in a scientific way, but only affirm the narrowly specialized practice of artists and view the history of art only as that of artists and art objects rather than that of artistic production. Classical art schools (academies) would be replaced by polytechnic institutes offering a proletarian, i.e., monistic and class-based education in art. Whereas bourgeois education is individualist and isolated from social practice, proletarian education is based on scientific research in the purposeful organization of life (“construction” supplanting bourgeois “composition”).

²⁹ Arvatov, *Art and Production*, 100–1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 102–3.

Finally, the socialization/statization of artistic labor opens the door for art to join in the rational and planned organization of everyday life. In a capitalist society, life, like the economy, is driven by spontaneous, anarchic “blind forces”, and is therefore bereft of purposeful planning that would satisfy its needs. Bourgeois everyday life evolves spontaneously, unconsciously, while technical progress does not organize everyday life. That is why bourgeois societies experience the following contradiction: an enormous and historically unprecedented level of technical progress amid conservative and archaic social tastes. Art is a typical product of this archaism; its purpose is to create an aura of the “beautiful” amid a permanently disorganized and anarchic reality. Easel art is therefore unable to organize life – the everyday takes place in spite of art. By contrast, socialism is a systemic and planned way of organizing life. By overcoming spontaneity and anarchy, art emerges in socialism as a means of organizing life. That does not mean that everyday life in socialism is static, but rather that it changes in line with the development of the productive forces (whereas in capitalism the evolution of life and the development of the productive forces inevitably end up out of step with each other). Art achieves that by having artist-engineers join in the process of industrial production; artists thereby acquire the opportunity to plan and entirely coordinate production and consumption (that is, to contribute to the harmonization, as Rubin asserts, of the material-technical process of production and the relations of production). In capitalist societies, producers are concerned with producing only in terms of meeting the demand, therefore in exclusively quantitative terms. By contrast, in socialism “it is the quality of labour (use value) that will be taken into account. In other words, the producers in a socialist society will have to orient their activity towards how their products will function in society – they will have to care about the life of their products after production, about their qualitative meaning for the consumers”.³¹ The artist-engineer serves as a bridge between production and consumption and thus becomes an indispensable link in the economic system of socialism, that is, a society where, as we already stressed above, use values are no longer produced as commodities but as ordinary use values.

A complete fusion of art with production will be possible only when society entirely begins to develop its productive forces in a collective and planned fashion. As long as there is even a fragment of society left out of planned organization, there will also be art made atavistically, outside of the state socialist economy and production, as a sort of supplement. In these supplements, people see in an organized way that which is not organized in their everyday lives (Arvatov cites the example of landscape painting – in agrarian societies, people were unfamiliar with landscape painting as a genre; landscapes emerged only with the rise of the bourgeoisie as a class separated from the land, whereas the genre reached its zenith only in the capitalist industrial revolution; portraiture experienced a similar trajectory – emerging only with complete social atomization and the rise of individualism). Bourgeois art is thereby a harmonious rendering of something that is disharmonious and disorganized. The transformation

³¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

of capitalist disorganization into socialist planning and planned organization of life would abolish this need for creating emotional supplements: in a rationally planned and organized society, whose subjects have a transparent knowledge of life and its regularities, the sort of art that we are familiar with would disappear. Art would merge with everyday life and planned fulfilling of human needs; that is, the disappearance of art as a separate and specialized profession would also erase the boundary between the practice of art and the practice of life.

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